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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of the fourth annual National Adult Student Priorities Study (ASPS) conducted to determine the areas of highest importance to students 25 years and older, the areas of greatest and least satisfaction to these college students, and the greatest performance gaps between levels of importance and levels of satisfaction. The ASPS Report contains data from 103 colleges and universities, and the adult student population in the national sample includes 35,576 students. The ASPS consists of 50 items, each of which is expressed as a statement of expectation. The scales are: (1) Academic Advising Effectiveness; (2) Academic Services; (3) Admissions and Financial Aid Effectiveness; (4) Campus Climate; (5) Instructional Effectiveness; (6) Registration Effectiveness; (7) Safety and Security; and (8) Service Excellence. A performance gap score is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A large performance gap score indicates the institution is not meeting the expectation. A table presents mean findings from the ASPS for all institutions in the survey. The use of the ASPS is discussed. (SLD)

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2003 National Adult Student Priorities Report

Study Conducted by Noel-Levitz

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2003 National Adult Student Priorities Report

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Rationale for Satisfaction Measurement

Student satisfaction studies are self-examinations that enable institutions to measure their students' satisfaction with a wide range of college experiences. By taking "soundings" of student satisfaction, institutions are able to pinpoint their institutional strengths as well as areas in need of improvement.

Traditionally, colleges and universities have measured one dimension of student satisfaction only. However, for greatest impact and accuracy, satisfaction should be viewed within the context of student expectations (levels of importance). For example, the quality of food service and the use of student activity fees repeatedly surface as areas of high dissatisfaction for students. But when asked to indicate the importance of these areas to their overall educational experience, students rate food service and activity fees relatively low.

The Study

This report reveals the results of the fourth annual National Adult Student Priorities Study by Noel-Levitz to determine the areas of highest importance to students 25 years and older, the areas of greatest and least satisfaction to these students, and the greatest performance gaps between levels of importance and levels of satisfaction. This two-dimensional approach uses the new Adult Student Priorities Survey™ (ASPS) to identify student concerns that are truly affecting student success. This survey is similar in structure to the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI). By revealing which aspects of campus students consider most and least important, along with how satisfied students are, this survey provides a vehicle for institutions to set priorities that are *closely aligned* with those of their adult students.

This report looks at the combination of the data to identify strengths (high importance and high satisfaction) and challenges (high importance and low satisfaction) for adult students.

The Source of Data

The 2003 National Adult Student Priorities Report represents data from 103 colleges and universities representing four-year public, four-year private, and two-year community, junior, and technical institutions that utilized the Adult Student Priorities Survey.

The adult student population in the national sample includes 35,576 students.

The Instrument

The Adult Student Priorities Survey, from which the data were collected for this report, consists of 50 items that cover the full range of college experiences. Each item is expressed as a statement of expectation. Each statement includes a rating scale of 1 to 7. Students are asked to rate the level of importance they assign to the expectation as well as their level of satisfaction that the expectation is being met.

The inventory findings are then presented with three scores for each item: an importance score, a satisfaction score, and a performance gap score, which is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A large performance gap score on an item indicates that the institution is not meeting the expectation; a small gap score indicates that the institution is close to meeting the expectation; and a negative gap score indicates that the institution is exceeding the students' expectations.

A sample of the ASPS items representing a broad array of issues relating to campus programs and services is presented at the end of this report.

The Scales

The items on the Adult Student Priorities Survey have been analyzed statistically and conceptually to create scales. The scales provide composite scores that allow for an overview of the data. The scales are as follows:

- ***Academic Advising Effectiveness*** assesses the comprehensiveness of the academic advising program, evaluating advisors' knowledge, competence, approachability, and personal concern for students.
- ***Academic Services*** assesses services students utilize to achieve their academic goals. These services include the library, computer labs, tutoring, and study areas.

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- ***Admissions and Financial Aid Effectiveness*** measures the extent to which admissions counselors are competent and knowledgeable, along with students' perceptions of the effectiveness and availability of financial aid programs.
- ***Campus Climate*** measures the extent to which the institution provides experiences that promote a sense of campus pride and belonging.
- ***Instructional Effectiveness*** measures students' academic experience, the curriculum, and the campus's overriding commitment to academic excellence.
- ***Registration Effectiveness*** assesses issues associated with registration and billing and the extent to which the registration process is smooth and effective.
- ***Safety and Security*** measures the institution's responsiveness to students' personal safety and security on the campus.
- ***Service Excellence*** measures the areas of campus where quality service and personal concern for students are rated most and least favorably.

Analysis of the Scales

The best place to begin is by looking at the big picture and understanding the areas on campus that matter most to students. The following table summarizes the importance, satisfaction, and performance gap findings for the eight scales on the Adult Student Priorities Survey. They are listed in order of importance.

2003 Scales: *Adult Student Priorities Report*

Scale	**Importance Mean**	Satisfaction Mean	*Performance Gap Mean*
Instructional Effectiveness	**6.46**	5.60	*0.86*
Academic Advising	**6.34**	5.45	*0.89*
Campus Climate	**6.32**	5.49	*0.83*
Registration Effectiveness	**6.31**	5.44	*0.87*
Service Excellence	**6.24**	5.18	*1.06*
Safety and Security	**6.14**	5.16	*0.98*
Admissions and Financial Aid	**6.12**	5.11	*1.01*
Academic Services	**6.07**	5.00	*1.07*

(7 = very important /very satisfied 1 = not important /not satisfied at all)

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Analysis of the ASPS Data

It is important that the analysis of the data include a combination of the importance, satisfaction, and performance gap scores. A combination of scores provides the most dynamic information for institutions to consider when developing an action agenda.

Using the matrix below permits the institution to conceptualize its student satisfaction data by retention priorities (challenges) and marketing opportunities (strengths). In addition, it allows the institution to pinpoint areas where resources can be redirected from areas of low importance to areas of high importance.

Strengths and Challenges

The individual items on the inventory can be analyzed to determine strengths (high importance and high satisfaction). These are the items that the institution can incorporate into their marketing activities for adult students, recruiting materials, and internal and external public relations opportunities; and can use to provide positive feedback to the faculty, staff, administration, and students on campus. *Strengths are defined as being above the median in importance and in the top quartile of satisfaction.*

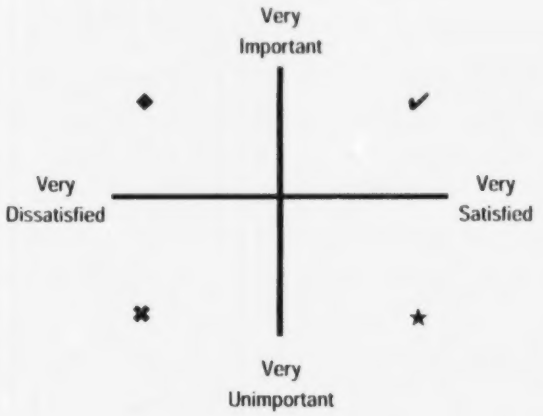
The items can also be analyzed to determine the key challenges (high importance and low satisfaction). These are the key areas that the campus needs to address to improve retention of adult students on campus. These are the items where students expect a lot, but where the institution is currently failing to meet the student expectations. The areas of dissatisfaction are prioritized by their importance score so the institution knows that it is working in the areas that matter the most to students. *Challenges are defined as being above the median in importance and in the bottom quartile of satisfaction and/or the top quartile of performance gaps.*

Following are the strengths and challenges for adult students. They are listed in order of importance.

Strengths (high importance/high satisfaction):

- The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.
- Nearly all faculty are knowledgeable in their field.
- The content of the courses within my major is valuable.
- There is a commitment to academic excellence at this institution.
- Major requirements are clear and reasonable.
- My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.
- Faculty are usually available for adult students outside the classroom.

Matrix for Prioritizing Action



◆ **High importance/low satisfaction**
pinpoints areas that should claim the institution's immediate attention, i.e., retention agenda/priorities

✔ **High importance/high satisfaction**
showcases the institution's areas of strength that should be highlighted in promotional materials

✖ **Low importance/low satisfaction**
presents an opportunity for the institution to examine those areas that have low status with students

★ **Low importance/high satisfaction**
suggests areas from which it might be beneficial to redirect institutional resources to areas of higher importance

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- Registration processes are reasonable and convenient for adults.
- I am able to complete most of my enrollment tasks in one location.
- The staff at this institution are caring and helpful.
- This institution has a good reputation within the community.
- My academic advisor is accessible by telephone and electronic mail.
- Faculty care about me as an individual.
- Classroom locations are safe and secure for all students.

Challenges (high importance/low satisfaction):

- Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.
- I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.
- I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information at this institution.
- There are sufficient options within my program of study.
- Adequate financial aid is available for most students.

Uses of Satisfaction Data

The primary uses of the results from the ASPS are similar to the ones that campuses indicate for their SSI results. These include developing awareness and readying campuses for institutional planning. Some other specific uses include:

- Setting a retention agenda for adult students
- Marketing the institution to adult populations
- Strategic planning for nontraditional programs
- Pinpointing the specific expectations of different demographic groups among adult students
- Providing direction to individual departments/ majors/programs
- Providing feedback to faculty, staff, and students
- Preparing self-study for accreditation
- Influencing budget decisions
- Enhancing total quality management

Participating institutions report that a more complete view of their adult students' concerns enables them to achieve significant gains in their institution's effectiveness more quickly with this special population because they know precisely where—and where not—to focus their time, money, and effort. As many of these institutions have learned already, the results of the inventory serve as a blueprint for initiating change. The ASPS data are allowing them to move ahead confidently, avoiding the mistake of relying on traditional, incomplete measures of student satisfaction.

Reasons for Surveying Annually

To get the most value from student satisfaction studies requires that institutions compare their students' perceptions over time. Therefore, more and more institutions are making the decision to survey their students on an annual basis in order to provide systematic and immediate feedback to their internal and external constituents on the effectiveness of all campus programs and services.

In addition, institutions report that their primary reasons for assessing adult student satisfaction annually include:

- Establish annual local benchmarks of their own adult student population
- Track the impact of new initiatives on adult student satisfaction
- Identify new areas for further improvement, based on the concerns of the current adult student body
- Track expectations of adult students as they progress through class levels
- Identify current strengths for recruitment activities
- Because what gets measured gets done

Summary

Successful institutions tend to share three basic attributes: they focus on the needs of their students, they continually improve the quality of the educational experience, and they use student satisfaction assessment results to shape their future directions.

Making the decision to regularly assess student expectations and levels of satisfaction can provide institutions with the insurance policy they need to maintain their edge in the academic marketplace.

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Students whose needs are actively addressed by their institution are more likely to be successful in achieving their educational goals and more likely to persist—and ultimately become the institutions' best ambassadors and future benefactors.

For more information:

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The Adult Student Priorities Survey™ was developed and is published by Noel-Levitz, Inc. The pilot study was completed in spring 2000.

Importance to me...
1 = not important at all
2 = not very important
3 = somewhat unimportant
4 = neutral
5 = somewhat important
6 = important
7 = very important

Sample Adult Student Priorities Items

...My level of satisfaction
1 = not satisfied at all
2 = not very satisfied
3 = somewhat dissatisfied
4 = neutral
5 = somewhat satisfied
6 = satisfied
7 = very satisfied

①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	Adult students are made to feel welcome at this institution.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	Faculty care about me as an individual.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	Classroom locations are safe and secure for all students.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	The content of the courses within my major is valuable.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	Career services are adequate and accessible for adult students.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	Adequate financial aid is available for most adult students.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	This institution offers a variety of payment plans for adult students.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	My academic advisor is accessible by telephone and electronic mail.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	My classes provide opportunities to improve my technology skills.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤
①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤	I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	①	≠	③	④	∞	±	≤

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